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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of technology in an attempt to curb school violence. Despite an increasing national focus on school violence and schools' growing desire for hardware to deal with the problem, the role of technology in making schools safer remains ill-defined and undecided. However, some educators caution that the use of technology should be part of an overall strategy to reduce violence. Attention to the human dimensions of a school's environment may be equally important. School boards can: (1) address challenges in the school environment, such as unresponsive and inappropriate curricula, ineffective teaching strategies, unrealistic educational standards, low teacher expectations for student performance, inadequate instructional and support services, a negative school climate, and teacher insensitivity to student diversity; and (2) forge community and family relations. (LMI)

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by Tim McCune

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In Washington, D.C., a city increasingly racked by crime that includes school violence, metal detectors top the "wish list" of school administrators there, according to Beverly Lofton, the D.C. school's deputy director for communication.

Lofton said that metal detectors are a key element of the schools' safety efforts. There are walk-through metal detectors in all of the district's high schools, and hand-held units in use at the middle and junior high schools. These devices supplemented efforts such as random searches of lockers and book bags and increased school personnel training to prevent and handle violence.

Lofton said that their wish list, "and it's only a wish list in the current budget situation," includes violence reduction technology such as closed-circuit television monitoring equipment, in addition to more sophisticated metal detectors.

Metal Detectors: Do they really help?

An increase in funds for metal detectors in Ohio this year proved highly contentious. In January, when Ohio Gov. George V. Voinovich proposed spending about $1 million to provide metal detectors to schools that wanted them, not all administrators leaped at the idea. Columbus public schools Superintendent Larry Mixon turned Voinovich down, saying, "We feel it would be inappropriate and premature to resort to the use of metal detectors at this point."

Mixon said at the time that the district has explored the use of metal detectors but was not sold on the idea. Mixon said urban school districts that have used the metal detectors found that running students through the device was cumbersome and not a certain solution to school violence.

These schools' experiences highlight that despite an increasing national focus on school violence and a desire by schools for hardware to deal with this problem, the role of technology in making safer schools is still ill defined and undecided.

The National Perspective

Vice President Al Gore, in a July 17 speech before the American Federation of Teachers conference in San Francisco, said the Administration has addressed the safe schools issue. "School violence, up; test scores, down," he said. "You know about these problems. You are on the front lines every day. That is why you have made safe schools and better test scores a priority, and so have we," he said.

"The President and I have been out to see those front lines, also, to talk with kids who want safe neighborhoods and safe schools," Gore said. "The problem is more far reaching than violence." There is the question of how much are children learning in the midst of that kind of chaos? Can they be competitive? In schools that are not plagued with gunfire, are our children getting the education that will allow them to get ahead?" he said.

But Gore, though viewed as the Administration's high priest of technology, did not mention how innovative devices and applications might make schools safer. This omission is consistent with current federal policy. The Safe Schools Act, signed into law in March as part of the Goals 2000 legislative package, authorizes the U.S. Secretary of Education to award competitive grants to school districts to help them reduce violence. But the amount of this money that can be spent on technology is restricted severely: not more than five percent of grant funds may be used for a category that includes purchasing metal detectors, instituting safe passage programs and hiring security personnel.

Bill Modzeleski, Director of the Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, said he believes that schools must evaluate technology carefully before using it to combat violence. "I think that technology has a role...we have to learn how to use the technology, but we can not have an overreliance on technology, because this is a people business," he

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Tim McCune is a former newpaper editor and current Washington-based writer. Mr. McCune's areas of expertise include use of technology to aid in prevention of crime and violence in the workplace and in schools.

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said. "Technology is part of what we are doing, but it cannot be all of what we are doing," he said.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) supports "a two-pronged effort" that includes countering school violence with technology, according to spokesperson Cathy Hunt. "In the short term, we certainly favor anything, any security hardware needed to make schools safer," she said. "One of the things we looked at was, when eight New York City schools employed metal detectors, attendance rose sharply because you give the kids and the staff a feeling of security," she said.

"But we also want a parallel approach that does not rely on security hardware to teach kids, as much as it sounds like a cliché, conflict resolution skills, just understanding that somewhat violent behavior, carrying weapons, just is not acceptable," Hunt said. "So there has been talk about security doors, cameras, metal-detecting wands, stuff like that. That is one of the things that we are calling for. This list is just preliminary," she said.

The AFT has called for a national conference on youth violence to be held later this year or in early 1995. Hunt said that the federation also has ongoing violence reduction efforts. "We do have a task force that will be meeting regularly to consider school, and we are open to pretty much anything," she said. Interest in high-tech assistance in maintaining school safety has been prompted to some degree by efforts to convert defense technology to law enforcement uses.

Dr. Linda Roberts, Secretary Riley's special advisor on education technology, in a recent interview expressed some skepticism that technology would make an impact on school violence and that defense technology in general could be adapted to school use. "My bottom line sense of this is that it is not technology that makes school safer but people," she said. "I have been in schools in what I would describe as the most incredibly at-risk neighborhood where the school is the safe haven because the community and the people inside the school believe it is a place that has to remain that way," she said.

On the issue of converting defense technologies, Roberts said, "On the one hand, I would say that it is very intriguing, but on the other hand you have to remember that in the military, expense is no issue, and the funding resources for schools are extraordinarily tight."

Modzeleski said that there might be some application of defense and other systems for violence reduction. "I think we need to do some exploration there, but I would be somewhat cautious," he said. "The systems that we are working with in schools are different from the systems that we are working with on the outside. And the people operating our systems are not the people who are operating the systems in the military," he said.

Use of technology and civil rights

Technology for school safety has for the most part centered on metal detectors, video monitoring systems and advanced identification card systems similar to those used in high-security installations, according to the National School Safety Center. While those sorts of monitoring activities raise civil rights questions in most environments, legal precedents and current policy will make use in schools much easier.

School teachers and administrators are given much greater leeway than police with respect to privacy issues. The Supreme Court ruled in 1985 in a delinquency case brought against a minor identified as "T.L.O." by New Jersey that students have less Fourth Amendment privacy rights than the general population. In that case, a student was caught smoking and a subsequent search of her purse revealed marijuana, paraphernalia and a large sum of money. The New Jersey Supreme Court ordered the evidence suppressed on Fourth Amendment unreasonable search grounds.

But Justice White, in the majority opinion, wrote that while schoolchildren have legitimate expectations of privacy under the Fourth Amendment, this right is limited. "Against the child's interest in privacy must be set the substantial interest of teachers and administrators in maintaining discipline in the classroom and on school grounds," he wrote. "Maintaining order in the classroom has never been easy, but in recent years, school disorder has often taken particularly ugly forms: drug use and violent crime in schools have become major social problems," he wrote.

More difficult to resolve are the policy questions arising from the doubts and expectations of parents, teachers and other education professionals."

You could talk to ten people [about metal detectors] and you are going to get ten different answers on that," Modzeleski said.

"The whole issue of metal detectors has proliferated over the last year," Modzeleski said. "We now have a significant number of school districts across this country using metal detec-

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tors. Some of the [districts] have begun to use them and then turned away from them. Some have purchased them and put them in closets and use them only on special occasions. The experiences have really been different from school district to school district," he said.

"What we say at the federal level is, look, one thing for sure is that if you are going to use metal detectors, you need to use them right," Modzeleski said. "Number two, metal detectors cannot be your violence prevention strategy. It can be part of your overall strategy, but it cannot be your only strategy. Three, you need to evaluate them. I think that in some districts you may find that they work well and in other districts you are going to find they do not work well," he said.

Modzeleski said that there is some indication that in some school districts detectors do limit the amount of weapons that are coming into a school. "But, again, we get back to the human factor," he said. "A metal detector by itself is useless. It is the people using it that have a lot to do with whether it's successful or not successful," he said.

Ultimately, the U.S. Department of Education might play a small role in the development of such violence reduction technology, Modzeleski said. "We are involved peripherally at best," he said. "First of all, there are not too many people out there who are doing it. The technology is really borrowed technology. For example, one somewhat successful strategy has been putting video cameras on school buses where there has been a lot of disruption," he said. The videotape is then used as evidence in disciplinary hearings and in talking to parents.

Adding to the confusion is a recent Delta Kappa-Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools that "fighting, violence and gangs" and "lack of discipline" were the two biggest problems facing public schools. Most of the 1,326 Americans responding to the poll had these concerns about school violence. But Delta Kappa, in the September issue of their Phi Delta Kappan magazine, contended that the "uproar" about school violence is a media phenomenon.

This contrasts sharply with remarks by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, speaking in August at the National Conference on Youth Violence in Washington, who said the students today have to deal with much greater violence than those of previous generations. "Think of what it is like today, where the young people in this room and the millions of others like them are immersed in a culture of violence, a culture that in so many ways glorifies violence," she said.

Mrs. Clinton, speaking after the crime bill's initial defense but before its ultimate passage, said that measures to combat school violence were in danger of falling for partisan reasons. "Those who voted against [the crime bill] do not seem to care that our children cannot feel safe at school." A recent survey showed that 15 percent of school children believe there are gangs in their school. Almost one in ten students in high school reported that in the previous month they had been in at least one serious physical fight.

Mrs. Clinton stressed the benefits of efforts such as the Community Schools Program that will give grants to community groups to keep schools open after hours and on the weekends.

She added that "safe places where [students] can engage in learning and recreation, where there can be adult mentors and coaches," are key to reducing school violence. "We know from the examples of such schools around our country that if schools are transformed into safe havens for youngsters, children will be safer.

Modzeleski said that schools need to strike a balance when using technology in violence reduction programs. "If you are going to make schools safe, you have to have policies, you have to have programs for kids, you have to involve the kids and involve the parents, you have to provide training for teachers," he said.

"There has to be a whole attitudinal feeling of respect for students and teachers in a school," Modzeleski said. "Whether it's the dress code, whether it's ID's or removing lockers — which is another thing that I see coming around for schools in several parts of the country," he said.

Also targeted by schools are baggy pants — which can hide weapons — and gang-related clothes, Modzeleski said. "A lot of those measures incrementally help," he said. "The bigger part is how are we going to deal with kids. Many of the problems that we are dealing with come from the family, come from the community and have little to do with the school. Therefore, the programs that schools need to develop must be broad based, must link-up with the community, and must be very comprehensive," he said.

What can school boards do?

While many of the behavioral problems that lead to violence in school today are the result of situations that Modzeleski notes exists within the family and the community, there are school-based factors that lend themselves to solution by school boards.

Patricia F. First, co-editor of and contributing author to *School Boards: Changing Local Control*, suggests some of the challenges in the school environment that are within the control of the school board: unresponsive and inappropriate curricula, inappropriate or ineffective teaching strategies, unrealistic educational standards, low teacher expectations for student performance, inadequate basic instructional and student support services, an overall school climate that students often perceive as negative, and teacher insensitivity to student diversity (p.190).

Through addressing these educational issues and forging the all-important family and community alliances, school boards can make a significant impact on reducing the occurrences of violence in our public schools and regaining the public confidence in education. ■